

Facilitating WIC Discussion Groups

Guidelines, Concepts, and Techniques

Providing a Discussion Group is an attempt to give individuals a more meaningful experience that involves shared learning. You will be the facilitator and assist a group discussion.

The individuals take on an active role in this learning process. They let you and other members of the group know what information they need at this stage of life by sharing their experiences. Learning becomes more effective when they learn from each other, as well as, from the information you share with them. This is especially true, if the information is related to their needs. Sessions vary in content and style, depending on the session objective(s), the specific topics that the participants bring up, and the personalities of the participants involved.

Here are some specific guidelines and techniques to help facilitate Discussion Groups:

➤ **Build Your Group from Within.**

Assure members that this is their group, and it is structured to fit their needs and concerns.

➤ **Establish Group Norms or “Ground Rules”.**

For example: set the time, agenda, and length of sessions; form rules on confidentiality; and clarify procedural issues, especially listening to others and respecting ideas or comments of others. Allow the group to make its own norms, which need to be acceptable to all members of the group.

➤ **Begin Each Session with a Check-in.**

This is not a rigid rule, but often useful in many groups. For example, this could involve an “icebreaker” where every member of the group shares – perhaps a brief statement of who you are, what new has happened over the last month. The main objective is to help participants feel relaxed and safe in stating their concerns.

➤ **Delivering the Opening Question.**

Silence and reluctance are normal in the early stages of a discussion. Before or after asking your first open-ended question (see page 2), you can prepare the group for this usual period of silence by telling them it’s okay to take a moment to think of their response. If the silence lasts longer than what you would consider being normal, ask or guess aloud about

what it may mean. Also, you can voice the fact that “it’s sometimes hard to be the first to respond,” or pick someone you know will be comfortable answering the question.

➤ **Ask Open-Ended Questions.**

This is a skill that gets people involved in telling their own experiences as they relate to the session objective(s). A discussion should then begin that flows naturally and freely. Asking open-ended is the most direct way to find out what these individuals need to talk about. These questions must be worded so that people do not feel they are being grilled, yet should enable you to find out key and specific information.

An open-ended question is one which cannot be answered by a “yes” or “no” and gives insight into the topic. There is no right or wrong answers to open-ended questions. Open-ended questions provide more information and are the same type of questions a good news reporter asks: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How much, How often.

If you set up a friendly atmosphere from the beginning, it will encourage participants to talk rather than just answering a series of questions. Also, balance your use of open-ended questions with the other facilitating skills such as clarifying or focusing.

➤ **Guide the Discussion.**

To facilitate means to allow things to happen and to make them easy. The facilitator allows others to speak and then gently bringing topics to an end. At the same time, you must stay in control of the discussion and avoid it becoming a “free for all”. If that happens, the quieter people will not have the chance to be heard, and no one will learn anything. Here are some specific points to bear in mind when guiding the discussion:

- Guide the discussion by holding off on some topics to be discussed, so that it doesn’t lose momentum. Keep the topic focused on the session’s objective(s).
- Actively encourage participants to give more information and better define their situations, as well as focus on specific concerns. The discussion will need to be “directed” in order to better find issues and feelings on which the participants would like to focus.
- Recognize fears, biases, and disagreement, and bring them out into the open.
- Look for feedback – yawns, stretching and other feedback which indicate whether or not people are listening.
- Avoid letting group members dominate “air time”. To someone taking over the discussion, you can say “your points are really interesting, but we also need to discuss some other issues. Why don’t you catch me after this session, or call me tomorrow, and we can talk some more” – or however you can say this without embarrassing the person.

- Avoid strong agreement or disagreement over a subject that leaves the impression that there's no sense discussing it.
- Find ways to limit constant complaining or blaming of others.

➤ **Encourage Participation.**

Ways to reinforce the importance of each person's input and encourage them to take part are:

- Focus on the person who is speaking; pay close attention to her (or him).
- If someone speaks too softly, repeat their question and/or comments to the group before replying.
- Give positive support and feedback to every person who speaks; a nod of the head or word of praise will encourage that person to speak again.
- Watch for non-verbal signs that may indicate someone else's desire to respond or ask a question.
- Use words which everyone is familiar with; avoid technical or medical terms.
- Check the seating set-up to make sure the circle will include everyone.

➤ **Focus on Topics.**

Focusing stresses a particular subject that you think would be helpful to the group to explore (or rather, the group has made it clear to you that they want it to be further explored). Commonly, a specific topic (or topic area) repeatedly surfaces in the flow of the discussion, in which case it may seem natural to further discuss and clarify it. This may happen naturally, or as the facilitator, you may need to ask more open-ended questions relating to the specific issue. The purpose of focusing the discussion in this case would be to help everyone better understand and further express their feelings about an issue that they have shown is relevant to them.

Another reason to focus the discussion would be to help make sense of a dialog that has ended up rambling, jumping from topic to topic without any sense of clarification, or has become unrelated to the session's objective(s). When the dialog seems to have confused both yourself and the participants, it is time to get things back in focus. To do this, you could select one point to repeat or reduce a number of points into a summary in order to focus on how the participants are feeling.

➤ **Focus on Feelings.**

Place primary emphasis on the feelings or experiences of each group member. Avoid debating ideas; this is a place for support and information sharing.

➤ **Practice Active Listening.**

Some people tend to speak more than listen. Listening is a skill that can be developed beyond the everyday practice we are all familiar with. It means that you must be silent and allow the participants to talk. We are all guilty of sometimes listening with half an ear to the speaker while busily figuring out what to say next, or how to change the subject o something we would rather talk about. However, in order to help someone, you must listen carefully to what they are saying and avoid the temptation to interfere with your own thoughts and interests. Many times someone has mixed feelings or several concerns, and may need more time to talk before you can be sure of how they really feel. Listening skills can give you this time. Encourage group members to listen to and understand what other group members are saying.

➤ **Clarify.**

This simply means making a point clear. To do this, you will first need to use your listening skills to help gather enough information about what a person has said to clearly understand their message and restate what you heard. This involves becoming an “active” listener, encouraging people to respond to your understanding of their statements and then showing acceptance of what they have said.

➤ **Stay with the Speaker.**

When one person is speaking, stay with that person until they are finished, rather than allowing other members to interrupt or take the floor. Discourage side discussions.

➤ **Accept People as They Are.**

Effective learning and comfortable communication can only occur when there is an atmosphere of acceptance. The trick here is to learn to accept and respect someone’s feelings without necessarily agreeing with their point of view. Respond to the feelings that are behind the comments being made; realize that you don’t have to “teach” something, but are here to listen to, talk with and learn something from the participants and their experiences.

➤ **Dealing with Strong Feelings, Doubts and Disagreements.**

Strive to be sensitive to the feelings of others; lead the group to share their knowledge and experience without telling others what they should do. Make sure that participant’s experiences and solutions to their own problems are offered to the others as “possibilities and suggestions” rather than telling only one way to do it.

➤ **Dealing with Erroneous Information.**

When someone's input to the group discussion includes incorrect information, you can make a statement that stresses the value of their experience and your respect for their decision, whether you agree with it or not. Some possible responses which avoid embarrassing the person are:

- "I'm very glad that worked for you. Other people have found that _____ worked better for them."
- "I'm very glad that worked for you, but all the references we've seen do not recommend it."
- "I'm glad you brought that up. That "used" to be what was generally recommended, but now new research has found that..."
- "You've brought up a really interesting issue. Let's look it up in (a specific reference) and see what they say about it."
- "That's too bad. What could you have done differently if you had the information we have talked about today?"

➤ **Summarize the Discussion.**

As much as possible, bring ideas together, highlight certain discussion or repeat related information, and complete one topic before going on to another. Some groups find it helpful to end the session with each participant sharing what the session has meant to them, and what they learned or discovered during the session. This way, the group can see that their input and shared experiences helped everyone to learn something (it can be particularly valuable for them to realize that they even helped you, the facilitator, learn something new!).

➤ **Assist Members in Gaining Resources.**

Provide sources of additional information such as pamphlets, videos, or by referral.

➤ **Above all – Have fun!**

Remember that it takes time for a group to grow and develop trust. Be patient and never define success by the number of people attending the session. Enjoy yourself and the group members, and encourage them to do the same.



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